

THE PHILIPPINES – A COUNTRY WITHOUT HUMAN RIGHTS?



The Philippines are very famous for their extraordinary landscapes, their rare and rich fauna and Manny Pacquiao commonly regarded as the world's best boxer. Yet though non-governmental organizations have continuously pointed to problems of inequality, corruption and violations of human rights throughout the past decade, there's little knowledge about social issues among Western societies. Being aware of a problem marks the first step to tackling it and thus, two Philippine Human Rights Defenders visited Germany to share their experience, to discuss with people, and to encourage them to take actions.

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© IPON | „German and European politics have to put a stronger focus on human rights violations in the Philippines“, Anne Spiegel (mid), vice chairwoman of the German green party during a panel discussion in Mainz.

On the 12th April 2012, Jessielyn Colegado and Danilo T. Gaban arrived in Frankfurt. They brought along a plan for the two-week speaking tour through Germany. The International Peace Observers Network (IPON) organized meetings, interviews and panel discussions in the cities of Leipzig, Berlin, Luneburg, Hamburg, Marburg, Bonn, Essen and Mainz. It was the first time for the two Filipino activists to travel abroad and to speak on behalf of their organizations in front of

an international audience.

Colegado is the vice president of PADATA¹. She lives in Panalsalan, a small village belonging to the province of Bukidnon in central Mindanao. The 49-year old married mother of five children lives mainly on the earnings of her corn and sugarcane cultivation. She is a founding member and an elected representative of PADATA.

Gaban is the regional coordinator of TFM² for Negros and an organizer for nationwide

1) PADATA (Panalsalan Dagumbaan Tribal Association) is an organization of several indigenous groups and families, which united in 2004 to peacefully fight for their ancestral land in the province of Bukidnon. Due to their struggle, the human rights defenders of PADATA face repressions and cases of harassment. Since 2011 PADATA and IPON cooperate to observe the human rights situation and to reduce human rights violations.

2) The nationwide organization of TFM (Task Force Mapalad) was founded in 1999. Its mission is “to improve the quality of life of farmers and farm workers by supporting their initiatives for access to land resources and productivity development” (www.tfmnational.org). Because of these initiatives, members of TFM face repressions and cases of harassment. Since 2008 TFM and IPON cooperate to observe the human rights situation and to reduce human rights violations.

protest actions. He supports farmers in administrative matters and advises them in the process of applying for land titles within the government-led land reform³. He regularly meets farmer leaders to discuss recent developments and future strategies .

When they left their home country, both activists shared high expectations regarding the speaking tour. While Colegado hoped to improve the security situation of PADATA and its members by sharing the issue with an interested audience, Gaban said: "We want to broaden our network and introduce TFM not only to interested NGOs, but also to politicians and state institutions". Both activists were not to be disappointed. They had constructive talks with NGOs such as the Society for International Development, the Forum Civil Peace Service, the Philippinenbuero, and Amnesty International Germany with agreements on closer cooperation and continuous exchange of information. Moreover, the two activists took the opportunity to address their issues at the German Federal Foreign Office.

IPON also tried to encourage the critical audience to support civil society



Asja Caspari | Public discussion with the Society for International Development and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Bonn.

initiatives and organizations and to motivate more people to get further involved in dealing with critical social issues, especially human rights. "How can I effect a change?", and "How does my signature make a difference?" these were the questions to be answered. Many people belief to be powerless in tackling human rights violations and global injustice. IPON sought to reduce doubts and to show ways to make a difference, to play a part in civil society and to improve the situation of human rights defenders. Together with PADATA

and TFM, the human rights organization drafted a letter to Undersecretary Catura of the Philippine Presidential Human Rights Committee⁴. The letter referred to international covenants on human rights and reminded the Philippine government of their obligation to uphold and guarantee human rights to all Philippine citizens. As of now, more than 100 people have signed the letter⁵. Furthermore, panel discussions with German politicians on the national and the Federal state level gave the audience and the panelists the chance to explicitly address German politics. In this context, IPON emphasized on the need to strengthen civil society initiatives and to stronger focus on the situation of human rights defenders in the Philippines. And some successes could be noticed. During the panel discussion in Berlin, Christoph Strässer, member of the German parliament for the Social Democratic Party (SPD), promised to bring the issue to the parliamentary board for human rights and humanitarian aid. The same commitment was expressed by Jürgen Klimke, member of the German parliament for the Christian Democratic



IPON | The beginning of closer cooperation? IPON at the office of Amnesty International in Berlin.

3) The Philippine land reform CARP (Comprehensive Agrarian Reform) was initiated in 1988 under the Presidency of Corazon Aquino, mother of the current President Benigno Aquino III, with the intention to redistribute land to the landless. Due to outstanding redistributions and a high degree of political pressure, CARP has been extended several times, lately until 2014.
 4) Undersecretary Catura is head of the Philippine Human Rights Committee, the „advisory body to the President in effectively addressing all human rights issues in the country” (Administrative Order No. 29, 27/01/2002).
 5) If you are interested in signing the letter, please contact aktiv@ipon-philippines.org.

Union (CDU). Even at the Federal state level, vice chairwoman of the German Green Party, Anne Spiegel, seemed willing to become active and promised to exchange information with Volker Beck and Barbara Lochbihler, her fellow party members on the national and European level. As Ms. Lochbihler was chairwoman of the board for human rights in the European Parliament, Spiegel said that a delegation trip of the Green Party to the Philippines could be considered. Nevertheless, the Philippines demonstrate that merely showing solidarity and goodwill will not change the situation. The island state ratified important international covenants on human rights, such as the ICCPR⁶ or the ICESCR⁷. However,

by referring to torture, enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings, international human rights organizations annually issue alarming human rights records.

Both activists have already returned to the Philippines, but the work and the engagement for the promotion of human rights will continue in Germany. There is hope that the speaking tour will encourage some people to reflect and promote human rights in Germany and that the involved politicians will effectively engage on human rights bases. The voice of the discontent in Germany shall eventually be heard by Philippine decision-makers and lead to adequate actions. ■

6) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>.

7) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>.



© IPON | How can German politics improve the situation of human rights defenders? - Jürgen Klimke (4th from the left), member of the German parliament, promises to address the issue at the parliamentary human rights board.

IPON STRENGTHENS ITS PRESENCE IN MANILA

For some time IPON planned to develop and strengthen the work on a national level. Since the beginning of 2012 this consideration was put into practice by setting up a coordination position in Manila. Since January Jan Pingel cares about this new task, which mainly includes the coordination and combination of the work in the regional offices as well as networking and advocacy with stakeholders at the national level. In addition to the core work in Bukidnon and Negros this new orientation intent to increasingly exert influence on decision-makers in Manila and thus support and protect the human rights defenders in the regions more effectively. Predominantly in Quezon City, the heart of the Philippine civil society, Jan Pingel will focus this year on maintain existing networks, build new contacts and put IPON, our partner groups and the cases from Negros and Bukidnon higher on the political agenda and the Philippine human rights discourse.

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